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Qualitative Inquiry, Activism, the Academy, and the Infinite Game: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This is the first of two special issues on qualitative inquiry as activism. This first issue focuses upon activism and/in the academy (academic work, academic cultures, academic practices, etc.), the second on activism in the processes of research itself and activism beyond the academy, in the world. Two issues with different themes, but the overlaps and conversations between them are both obvious and significant: inquiry is part of, rooted in, the academy; inquiry and the academy are both of, and in, the world. Drawing upon the concept of the “infinite game” where, rather than being driven by the need to win and compete (the “finite game”), we argue for the collective, collaborative work of giving close, deep attention to the human, the nonhuman, and the more-than-human in order to “create and recreate our institutions,” with activism key to this work.

Keywords

qualitative inquiry, activism, academic work

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Qualitative Inquiry and Activism

This is the first of two special issues on qualitative inquiry as activism. This first issue focuses upon activism and/in the academy (academic work, academic cultures, academic practices, etc.), the second on activism in the processes of research itself and activism beyond the academy, in the world. Two issues with different themes, but the overlaps and conversations between them are both obvious and significant: inquiry is part of, rooted in, the academy; inquiry and the academy are both of, and in, the world. As we describe below, the contributions across the two issues arose out a conference on qualitative inquiry as activism in 2019, which in turn was a response to the global challenges presenting themselves with renewed urgency at the end of the second decade of the 21st century: the climate emergency and human exceptionalism, the rise of the right, the intensification of injustice toward, and oppression of, peoples and groups, and more (see Denzin & Giardina, 2018). All these challenges demand a response from both qualitative inquiry and qualitative inquirers, “vital shifts” (Davies, 2019, p. 43) in us and in our work.

Activist qualitative scholarship has a rich history. The critical, the social, the moral, and the political have been at the heart of qualitative inquiry (see Denzin, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005, for example) over recent decades, but there is a renewed imperative in these times, argues Denzin (2018):

It is once again time to move forward into an uncertain, open-ended utopian future. It is time to open up new spaces, time to decolonise the academy, time to create new spaces for indigenous voices, time to explore new discourses, new politics of identity, new concepts of equity and social justice, new forms of critical ethnography, new performance stages.

These two special issues take up Denzin’s call (to arms), seeking to enact what Davies (2019) describes as a “different model of humanity than the generic neo-liberal subjects we have been pressed ... into becoming” (p. 43), as these issues’ contributors offer possibilities—local, partial, situated—for, and examples of, activist qualitative inquiry.

Activism in the Academy as “Infinite Game”

In his recollections of a career as an (accidental) activist scholar, Benford (2014) provides examples of the academy’s unsettled relationship with activism and, in turn, his own unsettled relationship with the academy, such as when he protested against apartheid in South Africa while the institution he was part of was investing money there. He offers an account of the impact of his identity as activist scholar on job security, and of his need to move away from this identity altogether in pursuit of tenure. He had to play what Harré et al. (2017, p. 5) term the “finite game” of the neoliberal academy. The finite game has rules, winners, and losers; the university works like the free market,

dissociating itself from its values and sense of social responsibility, “selling the commodities of knowledge and qualifications to students and other consumers, and striving for efficiency and excellence in the rush to win its own race against peer institutions” (Harré et al., 2017, p. 6. See also Davies & Bansel, 2005, 2010; Davies et al., 2006).

The “infinite game” (Harré et al., 2017, p. 5), on the other hand, is invitational and processual, “a symbol of our potential as people living together to be open and inclusive, and to promote the life, and growth, that helps us flourish as individuals and communities.” Rather than being driven by the need to win and compete, the infinite game involves the collective, collaborative work of giving close, deep attention—to the human, the nonhuman, and the more-than-human—in order to “create and recreate our institutions,” with activism key to this work:

Academic activism aims to document, subvert and ultimately rewrite the rules of the finite games we currently live by, so that they make more sense to us as people seeking to give of our best to an endeavour (‘the university’) that we cannot help but believe in. (Harré et al., 2017, p. 5)

Central to the infinite game is critical thought, brought to bear upon our own institutions as well as in relation to the world beyond. It’s the critical work of the infinite game that Benford (2014) was seeking to play, paying attention, listening, responding, acting, speaking up in the face of the injustices he was witnessing beyond and also within the academy. “The issue of growing inhumanity is at work inside [universities] too,” argue Harré et al. (2017, p. 7), “in the committee rooms and the reward structures... in our daily work with colleagues and students.” In the current geopolitical and socio-political context, the strength of the Black Lives Matter movement has, for example, confronted universities, challenging them to examine their practices in relation to race and racism and, in turn, in relation to knowledge and knowledge production. Whose knowledge is given credibility and why? Universities have, in some cases, become sites of collective action, of Black scholars coming together to challenge the long-standing epistemic hegemony of the white, heteronormative, male, positivistic scholarship (e.g., Bell et al., 2020; Scholars4BlackLives <https://www.scholars4blacklives.org/home>; Learning Scientists for Racial Justice <https://www.insidehighered.com/users/learning-scientists-racial-justice>; Race.Ed <https://www.race.ed.ac.uk/>)

In the infinite game, there is a re-imagining, an entertaining of the possibility there can be change, that we (and our institutions) are not locked into the repetition of the same (Harré et al., 2017) but can find different ways of doing what we and they do. It’s this possibility of change that the contributions in this first special issue explore. To reimagine the assumptions of the finite game takes courage; it involves paying attention, it involves thinking otherwise. As they seek to engage in the infinite game, these articles are “Slow Tiny Acts of Resistance (STaRs)” (Harré et al., 2017, p. 11; Mountz et al., 2015), and “acts of activism” (Madison, 2010).

Writing This Introduction as a Slow, Tiny Act of Resistance

The five of us—each in our different rooms, homes, places, each in our different worlds during this pandemic when none of us can go far beyond these limitations—“meet” online one morning in October 2020, to discuss this introduction. We are mere heads and shoulders to each other, in square frames on our screens. We must imagine, remember, what it’s like to be in physical proximity to each other. Our bodies positioned in this way—digital, partial, two-dimensional, distant—we consider how we will engage, as we write together, with the power dynamics that remain, are always, in play, entangled in networks and regimes of power. We consider how to make these visible; how, perhaps, to honor the impact of such power relations on our individual and collective voices. We talk, but talk only gets so far, so then we write; alone but together, separate but collectively; and, after a while, return (unmuting our microphones, turning on our cameras) to read to each other.

Not all academic writing is, nor needs to be, the same. Not all academic writing, not all academic writers, need(s) to play the finite game (and certainly not all the time), either epistemologically (as an apparently transparent representation of objective truth) nor politically (to feed the institutional need for individualized, “four star,” “excellent,” outputs). Our discussion about making visible the collectivity of our writing is not naïve. We do not consider we can somehow neutralize the working of power, either in terms of testimonial justice or in terms of hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2007). But writing together, each of us at our screens in each other’s invisible presence, writing ourselves to each other and into this text, is a slow, tiny act of resistance, a writing away from the rigidities and hegemonies of the neo-liberal assumptions of academic writing: “the act of collaborative research and writing opens up movement of thought—the rupture—the escape from the already known, however small and inconsequential each escape may seem to be.” (Wyatt et al., 2017, p. 752; see also Davies & Gannon, 2006; Speedy, 2008)

Edgar Rodríguez-Dorans recalls writing a paper with a colleague and their desire to position themselves as equal in terms of authorship, leading to the writing of a “legend” at the end of the paper identifying how each had contributed, and how these contributions had been “equal.” The academy does not make it easy to do this with its demands for hierarchically identified lists of authorship, and the concomitant assumptions about credibility and status of the author dependent on their positioning within this hierarchy (see Bristol Collaborative Writing Group, 2012, for a challenge to traditional academic authorship, another STaR). This has meaning beyond some kind of bureaucratic pragmatism, as the structures of the academy reward those who occupy particular positions within this hierarchy over others.

We align ourselves with the work of this special issue’s contributions concerning activism in the academy and carry through, here, an activist desire to usurp the norms of academic writing and open up a space for the recognition of the epistemic contribution of scholars in a more egalitarian framework. We follow other collaborative writing scholars (e.g., Gale et al., 2012) in the simple act, the small tiny act, of having

written alongside each other (alongside each other's blank screens and muted microphones) and witnessing each other's words. We make some of our individual texts from that October morning visible in what follows; yet we also acknowledge how Rosie Stenhouse is not individually visible, that her text from that morning is "lost" in these first three sections of this introductory article, subsumed and collectively authored in the first-person plural.

The politics of writing of academic writing are always present.

Origins

In February 2019, the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ECQI) was held in Edinburgh, hosted by the Center for Creative-Relational Inquiry (CCRI). Our invitation ahead of the event was for people to attend, to tell others, to bring others—students, researchers, artists, independent scholars—from across the globe. We asked that they bring their energies, commitments, imaginations, creativities, and possibilities—and suggested they bring coats, hats, gloves, and scarves to an Edinburgh winter.

We invited people to bring their activism. Their work as activism.

Jonathan Wyatt writes:

Today, in 2020, in the failing of the autumn mid-afternoon light, I bring my body into action. I bring this white, middle-aged, straight, male, body into action. This is what I can do. It is not all that I can do but it is something. I call this beating, flowing, aging, mess of a body into action, in all its ruptures and its fragilities, imbued with the stories and histories that have surrounded and called it to be all that is. Once the file is open and the cursor flashes, the text that appears, that emerges from the actions of this body, is what is possible. Nothing more, nothing less. As a member of the academy, in a position of security and status, this text is, in this moment, what I can do.

I was the director of ECQI in February 2019, the conference that generated these two collections of papers. My institution is ancient and wealthy (wealthy enough to survive, just about, the ravages of the 2020 pandemic). In pre-pandemic days, we hosted scholars from around the world as part of this conference on qualitative inquiry as activism.

We organized for there to be pipers who played for the guests at the conference dinner. They appeared at one end of the dining Hall, the former library of the central University, and processed the length of the Hall to honor the keynotes. I sat beside these colleagues, one an African American woman and the other who identifies as queer and male-identified trans. One of the dinner guests, sitting nearby, came up to me at the time to challenge the decision to have pipers play at a dinner for guests from overseas. They argued it was a display of clichéd Scottishness to entertain the tourists; it was reductive and colluded with the stories of Scottish oppression. How could I, positioned as I was, so misjudge what this might have meant?

I return to the text. I return to this 13-inch screen, its black keys and its white lit letters. I return to the autumn afternoon and the black cat that eases itself along the garden path below me to leap on the gate and traverse the wall to the left. It pauses for a moment then dips its sleek body under branches and continues out of sight. I glimpse now only occasional moments of its red collar. It was here for seconds then gone. Ephemeral, strong, its body present, passing through. Meanwhile, I am writing the body onto the page, looking for a scholarship that treads lightly in the world, that takes up space, that claims its space, but no more than its space, acknowledging what it can do and what it can't, acknowledging the effect it has, taking responsibility for the impact it has. A scholarship that provides space for others to find their position in relation to it, that makes itself vulnerable, here, now on the page, as well as out there, up there, on the stages of our institutional life.

Some of us who attended ECQI 2019 were clear that we *were* activists, that activism is what we *do*. Some weren't entirely sure what activism means but felt it right to align with this conference theme. For others still, the idea of calling ourselves activists was a stretch too far. Yes, we work and argue—often tirelessly—to make a difference to our lives, the lives of others, the environment, academy, and society at large, but we do this in silence—mostly in our little corners, from our shared offices, under warm duvets, in noisy coffee shops—our efforts muted by the relentless power of “the system.”

That week in February, we united. There were no placards, picket lines, chants (although there was some presenters chose to sing their research). There were academic papers and workshops, artwork and “game changers,” pens and PowerPoints, laptops and sketchpads.

Creative-Relational Inquiry (CRI) as an Agent of Change in the Academy

The Center for Creative-Relational Inquiry¹ at Edinburgh, which hosted ECQI in 2019, states on its website that it:

fosters qualitative research that is situated, positioned, context-sensitive, personal, experience-near, and embodied; research that embraces the performative and the aesthetic; research that engages with the political, the social, and the ethical; research that problematizes agency, autonomy, and representation; research that cherishes its relationship with theory, creating concepts as it goes; research that is dialogical and collaborative; and research that is explicit and curious about the inquiry process itself.

Working with the recognition that qualitative inquiry is, or can be, activism in the academy extends, deepens, re-frames and challenges CCRI's propositions, and has the potential to bring, create, and generate new ones: propositions that are slow and urgent, generous and edgy, open and restless.

Imposter syndrome lurked in shady staircases between sessions at the conference. You could hear the whispers: *who am I to argue that relationalities and intimacies are acts of activism? Who am I to see this research with young people about their relationships as activism? Who am I here, at this conference?* Yet there were moments when minds-bodies-souls connected in brightly lit basements with the realization that, for example, personal stories can shine light on global/macro issues in a way that “big data” never can.

We are reminded of Rosa Park’s brave, stark act in 1955. An “ordinary” person, albeit active in the civil rights, she’d had enough of the status quo and decided to do what she could, in a way that she could. Rosa became known as “the African American woman who famously refused to give up her seat on a bus when the driver asked a row of black passengers to move for a white man” (Bolton, 2018, p. 11). What followed was an arrest, but also a massive protest and public boycotting of busses for more than a year (381 days). With Martin Luther King, Jr. at the helm of a community improvement association, one woman’s “minor gesture” (Gale et al., 2012) became a U.S. Supreme Court ruling of segregation on busses as unconstitutional—“a huge victory and a turning point in the American civil rights movement” (Bolton, 2018, p. 11).

Yet, as Bolton (2018) reminds us, Park’s disruptive act was connected to something much bigger. She was at least the fourth black passenger that year to stay sitting when asked to move, but it was her case that had “the right ingredients for the [civil rights] strategy to catch light” (Bolton, 2018, p. 12).

Marisa de Andrade writes:

It never struck me that they might experience me as dark. Disruptive. I’ve always been a bit browner than almost everyone else in Scotland, especially in the depths of winter. But it never struck me that they might perceive me as that Black Minority Ethnic person who does Black Minority Ethnic research with people just like me rather than people who are not like me at all. I always thought the reason I connected so easily with Black Minority Ethnic people is because I could see past their labels and see their souls. Our shared experiences. Our collective pain, problems, frustrations. It never dawned on me that these traumas, difficulties, obstructions that they encountered—that I encountered—were precisely because I was (am) Black Minority Ethnic. Saying Black Minority Ethnic over and over again feels important, as if I’m getting used to my classification, as if I’m back in South Africa where I was born and bred. Back there, with my white (albeit it bronzed) skin and posh-Portuguese-pseudo-transatlantic accent, I was something different. I could have gotten away with being middle class if I hadn’t lived in quite a rough neighborhood: I was from “The South” of Johannesburg, which may mean nothing if you come from the northern hemisphere, but you’ll know all about people like me (a “Pora” from The South) in Jo’burg. I’d be a walking-talking stereotype if my dad had owned a fruit and vegetable shop and I didn’t sound so oddly elitist. But I got away with it because I hung out with people from “The North” and I helped people who were “disadvantaged” through the Mini then Junior City Council—a long established youth-led institution in Johannesburg

to develop, amongst other things, an awareness of those less privileged and societal problems. This meant I wasn't one of them, surely, though I'm reminded—right here, right now—by an immaculate and esteemed professor that the reason I get to engage with the “hard-to-reach,” with the Black Minority Ethnicities among us, is because I am one of them. I find myself Googling Rosa Parks. Not her work or her legacy, but photographs of her so I can figure out if I look like her. I don't.

I am not like Rosa Parks.

I am not Rosa Parks.

Disappointed.

Then I remember that they might experience me as dark, disruptive, and my mind goes back to that time when I stood in a room filled with white, middle-class professors (maybe some of them were research assistants on fixed-term contracts, but in my mind they were Profs—or different manifestations of my father, who paradoxically comes from a Portuguese colony and is a refugee—a very white one), and said I was the brownest person in the room, even though I wasn't brown.

I felt, for a moment, just a little like Rosa Parks.

Then I put in a research proposal called *Perspectives from the Frontline, Policies for the Poor: An Arts-Based Study and Radio Ethnodrama on the Politics of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil*, arguing for frontline medical professionals and students in the “disadvantaged” country to be “saved” from Covid-19 by talking about their experiences—telling stories, making art, creating radio shows. I don't mean “saved” as in “save their lives” like a vaccine might or modeling on social distancing curves or whatever. I mean saved as they process their traumas, speak through their pain, make sense of their realities as they work with death day in and day out, as they feel helpless but somehow find the strength to get out of bed in the morning *because* they are telling stories and making art and creating radio shows.

Is this even research, the academy asks, or is this Knowledge Exchange? Is art making even a method? What am I trying to prove anyway? The funding rejection said something about people being too consumed and too overworked while dealing with the “real problems” that Covid-19 brings that they wouldn't have capacity to do a project like this, which didn't seem quite urgent enough. Important enough.

They didn't say it like that, but that's how I took it. That's how I take it, day in, day out, when I have to fight for my master's by research program in Health Humanities and Arts to stay alive because it dances on the outskirts of mainstream academia, doesn't bring in large cohorts (I have visions of cattle being herded on to virtual learning platforms as it I type c-o-h-o-r-t-s, with numbers now uncapped and relational learning in rooms with bodies now almost obsolete).

How did it get to this?

What would Rosa Parks do?

Similarly, we would argue that creative-relational qualitative scholars need a “strategy” for collective voices to be heard and for change to happen in the academy. A loose and fluid, not fixed and certain, course of action but a strategy, nonetheless.

This special issue, developed from papers presented at ECQI 2019, and a long time coming, is part of that work toward a strategy. Words (and images), like seeds of hope, disperse.

Activism as Everything?

Activism is all at once something big and collective, private and intimate, a sharing of the personal in public to change the way things are, defined (and not defined) by its aims and/or its effects and/or intentions. Throughout both this and the second special issue, activism is addressed and embraced as it arrives on the body, in the body, in the classroom, in the academy, through stories of dictatorship, explorations of critical medical ethics, homophobia, living with a chronic illness, plights of refugees and xenophobia, trauma, trauma-informed practice, mental health, homelessness, and climate change.

Edgar Rodríguez-Dorans writes:

I am in an online meeting with four other people. It's late at night, and we're there in the setting of a community project. One of my colleagues apologizes for being slightly late and absent from previous meetings. One person asks how she's doing. She responds she's overwhelmed by a visa application process, which has been long and hard. I say, "I'm going exactly through that right now! It's such a demanding process, it takes a lot of my energy as I have to prove I'm worthy to live here." She nods and we share the intricate process of collecting evidence of our lives in the UK to demonstrate we fit into the desired model of ideal citizen. Once you submit your documents, the Home Office makes you wait for a couple of months before they make a decision whether you can stay or you have to leave. In Covid-19 times, this time prolongs, and you have to wait longer for a definitive answer. In my case, I've been told I have to wait 6 months in uncertainty. My colleague is visibly tired. I look tired as well. One of my colleagues who seemed silent and thoughtful during the exchange is asked what are their thoughts, to which they respond, "I was just thinking about how if there's a hard Brexit, I will call to my European heritage to get a second passport." Another member in the meeting says they would do the same—seek for a second passport as they have the chance to claim a second nationality. Someone else joins, and suddenly the three Brits are talking about how many nationalities they could claim.

As I witnessed their talk, I couldn't stop thinking about the way in which privilege works and how people can be blinded by it. I look at my colleague on the screen, I wonder what she's thinking, she just sits there silently as I do. While I wasn't expecting any type of special treatment or sympathy, I wasn't expecting either to be received with a display of social capital and privilege in the face of difficulty. I am annoyed at myself for not speaking out in these situations, to point out the issue. I feel I have some degree of responsibility for not calling out the issues as they occur because it means I'm in collusion with these everyday practices that perpetuate inequalities. But I wonder, if I spoke, would I have the eloquence to articulate my points? Would they listen? Would they understand?

I do my activism with the skills I have. As a mental health professional, I feel I have a role of being an openly gay person of color who comes from abroad to offer a different view on things from whatever my identities have to offer. As a researcher, I feel the responsibility of being interested in those aspects of life that come from experiencing the difficulties that systemic inequalities create in vulnerable populations. As I write the word "vulnerable," I want to emphasize that people are not vulnerable, but societies, systems, and circumstances make them vulnerable.

I have chosen to be an activist, but I also have been forced into becoming one. I find my words inappropriate as I don't want to give the impression I am doing this out of being forced into doing the type of research I do. But at the same time, I haven't had much of an option. Because the option would be to do nothing, to let it go, to keep going with my life in the face of oppression and acts of subtle and overt violence. So, I don't want "to do nothing." I am tired—no, not tired, frustrated? Angry? Furious? About the way in which my voice has been silenced in the academy since my formational years. Being told by professors during my undergraduate degree, that somehow, someone else with more power, with more knowledge, knows best about my experience. I became used to the lives of gay men being scrutinized by experts in psychiatry, in psychology, in medicine, claiming to know more about our lives. I recently came across the term "experts by experience" (Geregová & Frišaufová, 2020) when referring to people who have used drugs and have experience of homelessness and how their input in the education of social workers is valued and appreciated. I thought to myself: "such a massive change to the way in which some knowledges have been constructed in academic discourse – when some researchers claim to know more than the people they investigate about experiences that are not theirs." I have been recently referred to as a member of the BAME population, and although this was not in an aggressive manner, I felt it wasn't their place to name me in that way. These everyday practices of naming, categorizing, labeling speak about a claim of knowledge, of knowing quicker and better than the person themselves. I have recently come across the term "colonial dispossessions" (Pillow, 2020) to refer to the way in which colonialism has imprinted a strong—indelible?—mark upon oppressed peoples. In that paper, Pillow (2020) asks: "What forms of dispossession am I and the research process performing and perpetuating?" (p. 48) It felt like a liberating question, as it gave me the possibility of thinking about doing things with consideration of people's first-hand experience, with consideration of my personal circumstances and how they

affect the research process. If I see/feel an opportunity to point toward an issue, I need to call it out with whatever skills I have. I ask myself this question every time I am working on any research-related task: what type of research do I want? And what am I doing to achieve that?

What type of research do you want?

Fiona Murray writes:

The need to *call it out* as Edgar writes speaks to what Ahmed (2017) calls for in a feminist activism. She writes that “practicing feminism is about developing our feminist tendencies (becoming the kind of person who would be willing to speak out about sexism and racism)” (p. 38). Her Pakistani aunties taught her to speak out against violence and injustice (p. 4). She urges us to take this familial lesson forward and be willful in our speaking out and not accepting that this is “being oppositional” (p. 38), but in fact to speak out with the full knowledge that we have a lot to lose when we do but that it is our obligation (p. 260). hooks (1988) famously writes that we don’t find our voices by speaking out but by speaking back. Isn’t this what Rosa Parks did silently yet ever so loudly? Activism is carried through these papers, in dance, in words, and it whispers in the spaces between and is carried on the stroke of the paintbrush as it falls outside of the lines and comes off the page towards us asking us to notice; the words ask us to hear, to continue the work and to continue to carry the activism that touches us the most, to speak out and to continue the call to call out in the hope that it lingers, sticks, and like the lessons before, continues to be passed on until thousands of justices willfully begin to exist.

The contributors in this issue (and in the subsequent issue) engage with and aspire to activism and activist research through dialog, arts-based methods, artful autoethnography, writing as inquiry, collaborative writing, drawing, film, forum theater, narrative, new materialism, painting, ethnography, poetic inquiries, and more. With scars—on the body, on the mind—on the mind-body, on the bodies collected. At first powerless and vulnerable, this qualitative inquiry, through small, tiny acts of resistance, seeks to disrupt academic hierarchy and move beyond dissatisfaction to movement that matters, as “we think together about how to keep the infinite game in play, about what it means to be activist in our universities in this time, [as] we struggle in a welcoming way over the inevitable differences in our views” (Harré et al., 2017).

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1. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/ccri>

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